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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 002935

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STATE NEA/ELA FOR ABERCROMBIE-WHINSTANLEY/WILLIAMS/DONICK
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SUBJECT: LEBANON: SINIORA UNCONCERNED BY AOUNIST THREAT

REF: BEIRUT 2920

Classified By: Jeffrey D. Feltman, Ambassador. Reason 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

11. (C) During a September 11 meeting with the Ambassador and poloff at the Grand Serail, Lebanese Prime Minister Fuad Siniora reviewed his recent visit to Saudi Arabia as well as British Prime Minister Tony Blair's stop in Beirut. On the reconstruction effort, Siniora provided a clearer picture of the key GOL personnel with whom the donor community should coordinate. Despite the Ambassador's misgivings, he insisted that the GOL will move ahead in providing prefab housing as a temporary shelter strategy, absent any other workable option. Siniora said he would be able to handle any civil strife campaign launched by the Aounists, but asked again for immediate support to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and Internal Security Forces (ISF). On UN issues, Siniora said that he is staying out of the negotiations involving the IDF captives held by Hizballah, and is -- perhaps prematurely -- confident the GOL will pass the statute for the special tribunal for the Hariri assassination (once it receives the UNSC-agreed draft). Siniora was joined by senior advisers Mohammad Chattah and Rola Nouredine. END SUMMARY.

BLAIR MEETING AND SAUDI VISIT

12. (C) Looking worn-out after having hosted the British Prime Minister all day, Siniora said that he had focused Blair on three issues: Sheba'a Farms as the key to Hizballah's disarmament, the 1949 Armistice Agreement as the destination that allowed creativity in Israeli-Lebanese contacts, and the Middle East peace process as reversing the declining reputations of the U.S. and UK in the Arab world. Siniora told the Ambassador that "the time is ripe" for movement on all three issues, assessing that the Olmert government is in a precarious position right now and has to "think outside the box and keep moving forward, otherwise it will fall." He views Olmert's recent positive movement on the Sheba'a Farms issue in this context.

13. (C) Siniora said that his weekend trip to Saudi Arabia had been very positive, and that the Saudis are "very supportive." He remarked that King Abdullah had "lavished praise" on him, which made him "very embarrassed" (though he

clearly enjoys these little boosts). According to Siniora, the Saudis are fed up with Syria and Hizballah, though are a bit more circumspect on Iran, whom they "have to deal with". The Saudis are also urging a return to the Middle East peace process.

DEALING WITH RUMORED AOUNIST STRIFE

14. (C) The Ambassador asked about the rumors of a planned Aounist disobedience campaign following Ramadan. Noting that the relatively muted demonstration -- we heard estimates of only 2,000 protestors -- in downtown Beirut to protest Blair's visit had been easily contained by a strong ISF presence in the streets, Siniora said that he would "clamp down" in the event of an Aounist challenge. The Ambassador suggested that the LAF should be deployed instead of the ISF to contain any post-Ramadan strife since the Aounists will seek to provoke the Hariri-aligned, Sunni-commanded ISF into firing on the protestors. Siniora agreed with this, but added that he hopes to defuse the campaign by immediately directing funds towards "special projects" in the Aounist strongholds of Jbeil and Keserwan.

A CLEAR ADDRESS FOR RECONSTRUCTION

15. (C) Regarding the rebuilding effort, the Ambassador asked for a definitive answer on the GOL point of contact on reconstruction issues. Siniora said that his special adviser Ghassan Taher-Fadlallah is in charge of overall project coordination, while Finance Minister Jihad Azour is in charge of coordinating donor funding. Siniora assured the

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Ambassador that Taher is the primary contact for foreign donors. (Comment. We met with Taher earlier on September 11 and will report that meeting septel. Interestingly, Siniora did not once mention the name of Nabil Jisr, the new head of the Council for Development and Reconstruction and Taher's predecessor. End Comment.) In response to the Ambassador, Siniora said that he hopes to host a Beirut I conference by the second week of November.

16. (C) Noting that the previous GOL shelter strategy devised with UNHCR seemed superior, the Ambassador questioned the GOL plan to provide prefab housing for those who lost homes in the recent conflict. Siniora said that the initial UNHCR proposal to build a single permanent room (with kitchen and bathroom) for families to live in for the time being and expand on later is "not very workable." Instead, Siniora wants to provide prefabs for now and start disbursing money for people to begin building a permanent home. "Nabih (Berri) is very supprotive, and there is no other credible alternative," claimed Siniora, "What can I do?" When the Ambassador pressed him more on this, Siniora admitted that "Nabih is the man behind" the prefab idea. (Comment. We note again (reftel) that there is a Berri-allied company in the Biqa' Valley that produces prefab housing. End Comment.)

EYE ON THE LAF

17. (C) On military assistance, the Ambassador asked if the LAF and ISF have controls to ensure that any weapons would not fall into the hands of Hizballah. Siniora said that some support needs to be provided as soon as possible as a "show of confidence" in the army, noting that the LAF's performance in southern Lebanon and the border with Syria will be monitored closely. "The LAF will have to fulfill its mission," Siniora stressed, "They will be worried that someone is always looking over their shoulder." The Ambassador confirmed that, indeed, both Israel and the international community would be watching Lebanon's security performance, particularly in fighting arms smuggling. In addition, Siniora said he is willing to continue the

LAF-UNIFIL-IDF coordination sessions in Naqoura, but needs a plausible excuse to do so, such as discussions on amending the 1949 Armistice Agreement. Siniora promised to speak to UNIFIL Commander Alain Pelligrini about this.

SPECULATING ON SHEHADE ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT

¶18. (C) Regarding last week's assassination attempt on ISF Lieutenant Colonel Samir Shehabe south of Beirut, Siniora said that it appears to have been a professional hit with a serious organization behind it. While acknowledging that the investigation still has not provided any indications of suspects, Siniora speculated that Syria is most likely involved, perhaps in collaboration with a local group such as Ahmed Jibril's PFLP. He discounts theories that Shehade is the victim of a turf conflict among the Lebanese intelligence services. Notably though, Siniora said that it is "rash" to say that Shehade was targeted "just because he was involved in the Hariri investigation."

UN ISSUES

¶19. (C) On the establishment of a tribunal to try suspects in the Hariri assassination (and possibly other related acts), Siniora optimistically expects to be able to present the statute to the Cabinet in "about a month" and does not believe he will have any trouble getting Hizballah to agree to the tribunal (Comment. We received a less rosy perspective on timing and Hizballah buy-in from Minister of Justice Charles Rizk, also on September 11, which we will report septel. End Comment).

¶10. (C) The Ambassador noted the importance of getting information to Israel regarding the Israeli soldiers kidnapped by Hizballah on July 12. Siniora said he has been in contact with UNSYG Annan regarding the two IDF captives and has arranged for a meeting between UN representatives, including Special Representative for Lebanon Geir Pedersen,

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and Minister for Energy and Water and Hizballah member Mohammad Fneish. Otherwise, Siniora said he intends to remove himself from the matter and, concerned about potentially interrupting a delicate process, claimed to have told Annan that "I won't interfere unless you tell me to do so."

UNGA PLANS/AMBASSADORS' LIST

¶11. (C) Siniora confirmed that he will not be travelling to the United Nations General Assembly and prefers to let President Emile Lahoud "enjoy New York on his own." The Ambassador probed on Lebanon's potential ambassadorial appointments. Not giving too much away, Siniora said the list of MFA recommendations has yet to come up for Cabinet approval, but that the suggestion of Nawaf Salam for New York is "valid", while the name of Boutros Assaker for Washington is "not valid," intimating that Assaker himself does not want Washington and is aiming for Paris (to be near his wife who has reportedly been tapped as the Lebanese representative to UNESCO).

COMMENT

¶12. (C) Siniora, visibly tired, did not focus in depth on any topic in this hour-long session. Inter alia, we tried to focus him on the importance of keeping the IDF-UNIFIL-LAF coordination going beyond Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon and on the leadership role he should be seen as playing in trying to secure information, and release, of the Israeli captives. Yet much of what Siniora said -- Shebaa, Armistice Agreement, revived peace process -- was simply

recycled from numerous earlier sessions with him, as if he was on automatic pilot. When we asked specifically about the German and UNIFIL assistance at the airport, seaports, and land border crossings, Siniora confessed that, between his Saudi trip and Tony Blair's visit, he needed to update himself before answering. Even the sympathy he expressed to us on the sad anniversary of the 9/11 attacks had an uncharacteristic pro-form ring to them. Siniora sounded refreshed when we talked with him this morning (9/12) to object to his reported request to Kofi Annan to drop all references to UNSCR 1559 from the UNSCR 1701 report: claiming to want disarmament of Hizballah "more than anyone," Siniora said that he was merely trying to get Annan to make references to 1701 itself and to Ta'if more than to 1559, since 1559 has been so thoroughly discredited locally as a U.S.-Israeli project. It's not the concept of disarmament that causes problems, Siniora said, but rather than the basis needs to be more Lebanese than 1559 is perceived.

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